

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR"

# ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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## SEBASTIAN STROME.

### CHAPTER II. DENE HALL.

DENE HALL was a mile and a half distant from Cedarhurst Vicarage—not counting the half-mile of avenue; and there will be time, while the Reverend Arthur Strome is walking these two miles, to give you some notion about the place and people he is going to see.

The house looks its best under the slanting beams of an afternoon sun, which bring out the warm ruddy hue of its Elizabethan brick walls, and casts afar the shadows of its fantastic chimneys. It encloses a square court, with an arched cloister; and a fountain plashes into a circular basin in the central glass-plot. It stands on a sort of artificial plateau, some six or seven feet above the level of the surrounding park, the boundaries being built up solidly with stone, and the descent from the higher to the lower level being accomplished by flights of broad steps. This raised area, some ten acres in extent, is laid out in elaborate gardens. Along the front of the house extends a broad gravelled walk, and from a point in front of the main entrance four straight paths radiate fanlike, bordered with thick yew-trees, which, in the brightest sunshine, seem to retain in their foliage the gloom of night. Between, spread broad lawns of fathomless turf; huge carven vases mounted on pedestals occupy the corners of the walks, their grey outlines softened by the sprays of creeping plants which have been planted in them. The flower-beds are replanted every two or three weeks, and their hues graduated and

patterned out according to the latest refinements of chromic art; and there are grey stone benches among the rhododendrons, whence this painting in petals may be enjoyed at leisure.

Under the southern wing of the house a smaller walled-in garden is kept in the Queen Anne style. Here the eye follows down rigid vistas, till it rests upon a rococo statue at the farther end; the paths are bordered by narrow rims of white stone, and the trees are pruned into shapes of monstrous regularity. Nature seems to have donned ruff and farthingale, and to be stepping on high-heeled shoes. In a circular open space at the centre stands a sun-dial a hundred and fifty years old, whose green bronze disk, engraved with a medley of astronomic and astrologic signs, still tells the hours when they are sunny. A gigantic wisteria is trained against a southern wall, its clusters of faded-purple blossoms filling the air with fragrance, and in the warmest weather a dozen orange-trees in boxes are ranged along the terrace, and small green and yellow oranges venture forth on the boughs, and try to pretend that they fancy themselves in Italy. It is a wonderful garden for sentiment.

The great park outside, with its three thousand rolling acres of turf and brake, is diversified with clumps of burly oaks and ancient distorted thorns; and a stately avenue, half a mile in length, bordered with towering horse-chestnuts and lime-trees, three deep on either hand, leads up to the Hall. Beautifully does the sunshine filter down through the deep boughs and gild the shadow-haunted turf beneath; and when, far down the green corridors, a group of deer with slender limbs and poised antlers halt to gaze at the approach-

ing visitor, the world seems almost too gracious to be true.

But unfortunately in no part of England that has yet been discovered do June and July last all the year round; and even Dene Hall in December is not altogether so paradisiacal a spot as in the leafy months. Naked boughs and grey immitigable heavens make the broad park dreary; and although the Hall itself, thanks to its lofty site, never falls into that state of mouldy dampness which besets so many English country-seats, yet cheerfulness is a thing which not even gravel and drainage always suffice to ensure. The best way to enjoy December weather here, as elsewhere in Britain, is to stay within doors before a big fire and try to forget all about it.

Such is, or was, Dene Hall, whose foundations were laid by Sir Richard, the first baronet, in the middle of the sixteenth century, and which has never once passed from the possession of the family. The last male child destined to bear the name was born in 1795, and died the year before our story opens. Sir Hubert's will bequeathed to his only child, Mary, his entire personal and landed property without reserve—Lady Martha Dene having been dead many years—and she thereby became the richest heiress in the county. Inasmuch as she was handsome and accomplished into the bargain, that valuable class of persons who do their neighbour's prudence for him, opined that the estate should have been afforded some sort of security against the wiles of fortune-hunters.

"What," cried Mrs. Musk-Mandalay, thinking of her five-foot-seven of unbaked, sandy-haired male offspring, "what, my dear major, is to prevent the first immoral Frenchified adventurer that comes along from bamboozling that headstrong girl, and stealing away that superb property from those who deserve to possess it?" And the melancholy major shook his head.

It is possible, however, that Sir Hubert Dene, who was not a fool, did not draw up his will in so reckless a manner as Mrs. Musk-Mandalay supposed. He had enjoyed ample opportunities for studying his daughter's character, and may have acted with an eye to the knowledge he imagined himself to have acquired of it. She had been her father's constant companion ever since her seventh year, and he had taught her many things not included in the ordinary feminine curriculum. She could not only saddle her horse and ride it, but

she could exchange it for a better at a horse-fair. She could mow a field, drain it, plough it, and rotate its crops. She could bring a pheasant down with a gun, as well as cook and carve it. She could not only listen to gentlemen's small-talk in the parlour, but she could oversee workmen digging a well or building a wall, and discourse such sense to them as to make their ears tingle. She could as easily instruct the London solicitors—Messrs. Fry and Griddle—when to sell stock and when to hold on to it, as she could check the housekeeper's weekly account. She was not very skilful at trilling Italian airs, or warbling French chansons, but she could sing a hymn in a way to make your heart beat. When she walked about the grounds she did not hitch herself along by her shoulders, with her skirts in one hand, her parasol in another, and her elbows in her ribs; but she stepped out boldly, on elastic feet nine inches long, and with her arms hanging at her sides, like Juno's in the Greek statue. She had the full use of all her limbs.

Once, as she was returning home after pruning some trees in a neighbouring preserve, with her axe in her hand, and dressed in a dark serge gown, with a thick quilted under-petticoat of scarlet cloth, she was chased into a corner by a bull. As she ran she loosened the petticoat, and, watching her chance, stripped it off in a moment, and cleverly tossed it on the animal's horns as he was charging her. At the same time she sprang to one side, and as he passed brought down her keen hatchet just behind his ears, and tumbled the huge creature dead at her feet.

This deed of prowess was witnessed by Sir Hubert, the gamekeeper, and another man, as they were racing headlong across the adjoining field to her assistance. The bull was a prize animal, valued at five hundred guineas; and Sir Hubert, after heartily thanking God for his child's safety, turned to the gamekeeper, and said with a rueful twinkle in his eye:

"After all, Wilkins, you see, we were not in time to save him! He's quite dead."

Miss Mary overheard this remark and the laugh which followed it.

"No bull or anything else shall chase me across a field and live to tell of it," said she very grimly. "If I hadn't killed him this afternoon, I would have shot him this evening. Wilkins, give me my petticoat."

And yet a mouse or a bat had the power to thoroughly terrify this redoubtable young woman; and she was a firm believer in apparitions, which she had never seen, and in omens, which she saw everywhere.

On her nineteenth birthday she shut herself up in her room, and cried there for seven hours, off and on, because she had boxed the ears of her favourite maid, Fanny Jackson, for telling a fact which she (Mary) believed at the moment to be a falsehood. A bouquet had been sent, addressed to Miss Dene, and she had somehow taken it into her head that it was the gift of Sebastian Strome. Fanny, the maid, affirmed that it came from Mr. Selim Fawley, and suffered for her truthfulness as above intimated. Well, when at the end of the seven hours Mary Dene came out of her room, she called Fanny to her and humbly begged her pardon. This having been accorded, with many asseverations of affection, Miss Dene next handed the girl a year's advance wages and a written testimonial of character. "You must go to-morrow, Fanny," said she. "I shall miss you more than you will miss me; but I won't have anyone staying in my house whom I have unjustly insulted!" Fanny was fain to obey; and this was the first and last occasion on which the heiress of Dene Hall so forgot herself with a servant.

It would be easy to multiply anecdotes of her girlhood; but enough has been said. After this nineteenth birthday she began to grow rather more orthodox. "We shall civilise her in time," said Lady Featherstone (who had been, though the circumstance had quite slipped her memory, the daughter of Madame Marigolde, the once famous milliner of Old Bond Street). "There is good material in Mary, and I am sanguine we shall be able to make her up into something quite *distinguée*." Miss Dene, in short, began to give up tramping about the farm, and taking the spade and scythe from the hands of the labourers. She recognised, though late, the fact that it was as a woman and a lady, and not as a man, that she must take her place and show an example in society; and so, without useless repinings, though not, perhaps, without some reasonable regrets, she set herself to the task.

She went up to London and had some dresses made; and it was then discovered for the first time, by everyone except Sir

Hubert, who had known it all along, that her figure and bearing were as noble as her face. She attended church regularly to hear the Reverend Arthur Strome preach; partly, no doubt, to show her bonnet; partly, from religious motives—though she had never been given to theological bigotry; partly, in the interests of social order, of which she had always been a staunch supporter; but chiefly by reason of her thorough-going and reverent affection for the vicar and his wife. She idolised those two persons with all the ardour of an outwardly cool and reserved nature. They sympathised with her, and understood her as no one else did; for the generality of her acquaintance regarded her as proud, cold, hard-headed, masculine, and so forth. Even her patroness, Lady Featherstone, admitted that she was "a bit antiquated yet;" while Mrs. Musk-Mandalay openly declared her opinion that the heiress of Dene Hall was "naughty."

But to win her friendship, and cause her to respect yours, it was necessary either to be very sincere and single-minded, or to possess a really great genius. She loved the Reverend Arthur Strome on the former account, as she would have loved a Mirabeau or a Napoleon on the latter. The surest way to influence her was not to wheedle but to command her; and she could best be commanded by truth and power.

Her father's death, occurring at the close of her twentieth year, matured her character. Her features, which were of the antique Roman type, easily assumed an air of gravity; she did not look like a mere unmarried girl, scarcely out of her teens. Indeed, however feminine may have been the secret qualities of her heart and soul, her intellectual part seemed less that of a woman than of a man. She had had the freedom of her father's library, and she read enough there to open her eyes to some of the infirmities and diseases of the social fabric, and had pondered over those old problems that have puzzled all ages until she fancied that she could devise solutions of most of them. She was not shy of speaking about them to what she supposed were fitting ears, and astounded more than one humdrum old dowager by the straightforward composure of her comments upon matters deeply affecting the welfare of mankind; while her friend, the vicar, and Doctor Stemper, the



physician of the neighbourhood, found that they could consult with Miss Dene quite as frankly as with the late Sir Hubert about the condition and needs of the parish. Should it be inferred from this that the young lady was less pure-minded than became a daughter of the English aristocracy, I can only say that one look from her full, slow-turning brown eyes would have dissipated the most fastidious misgivings. But hers was a large nature which could not satisfy itself with a life of effeminate jots and tittles.

Her widowed maternal aunt, Mrs. Fawley, was invited down to live at the Hall after Sir Hubert's decease. She had been Miss Sophia Cambrey, second daughter of the Honourable Gambleton Cambrey, brother of Lord Welshford. Joshua Fawley, the hero of her young affections, had been a good-looking young Hebrew, belonging to the younger branch of a highly respectable family in the City. But Mr. Cambrey did not approve of the match; and the handsome Joshua was rash enough to suggest an elopement. The idea perfectly suited Sophia's romantic nature, and it was successfully carried out. But the marriage turned out badly. Joshua had no money of his own, though his uncle the banker was wealthy enough, and his involuntary father-in-law would have nothing to say to him. Thinking that it might be his Judaism that was the difficulty, Joshua took an early opportunity of becoming a convert to the doctrines of the Church of England; but fate thereupon played a counter-stroke and lost him the game. The Honourable Gambleton Cambrey had staked everything that he possessed against his horse Ab Gwylim, the favourite for one of the great handicaps of that year. He saw Ab Gwylim pass the winning-post first by a length; and five minutes afterwards he retired into a private chamber connected with the grand stand, and there blew out his venerable brains (he was near seventy at the time). Ten minutes after that it transpired that Ab Gwylim, not having carried the proper weight, had not won after all. But the news came too late to do Mr. Cambrey any good—or Joshua Fawley either.

The latter gentleman went abroad with his wife, and very little was seen or heard of them for some twelve years. Lord Welshford occasionally sent them money, and so, it may be hoped, did their uncle the banker. At last Mrs. Fawley reappeared in England, a widow and childless.

She was provided with a decent maintenance by her relatives; and occasionally made long visits to her "darling brother-in-law, Sir Hubert." It seemed natural, therefore, that she should be selected as companion for her orphaned niece. She was a lean, graceful woman, with an insinuating smile and a handsome instep, both of which she was fond of exhibiting. Her face also had been handsome once, but now the whites of her eyes were brown, and her skin yellow and criss-crossed with innumerable fine wrinkles. She suffered from neuralgic headaches, and took morphia and the like drugs to relieve them. She, however, filled her post in the Hall admirably, displaying surprising tact in her behaviour to Mary, and often showing an amusing wit in her remarks upon persons visiting the house. Upon the whole the elderly lady and the young one got on together better than could have been expected of two natures so radically unsympathetic.

At this period Miss Dene received a great deal of sentimental attention from the bachelors in the vicinity, both the young ones, and those not so young; but such was the singularity of her behaviour under this infliction, that of all who presented themselves with intentions, two only mustered resolution sufficient to make an explicit declaration thereof. The heiress entirely failed to show a proper feeling under the circumstances; she was too much for her suitors; she disconcerted them. When it came to putting their fate to the touch they too much feared it, and so lost it all. It was found impossible to get up what is known as an interesting conversation with the young woman. Her talk was of cattle, of subsoiling, or of her schemes for a local Home for destitute women and children. The difficulty of giving a tender turn to topics like these is obvious, and to break baldly in upon them with an avowal of passion would be a suicidal absurdity. Aunt Sophia contributed to the discomfiture of the aspirants by good-humoured but telling ridicule; until by degrees one after another dropped away, and the field was left clear to the pair of unterrified ones above alluded to.

The first of these was Mr. Selim Fawley, who possessed the formidable advantage of Aunt Sophia's support. Whether she gave this out of the pure love of her heart for her young nephew, or whether for this and something else we need not now enquire. Being the son of David Fawley, Esq.—the



elder brother of Joshua, and a partner in the banking-house—he was a sort of second or third cousin of Mary's, and was considered a very eligible match. He had taken high honours at Oxford, and after finishing his education on the Continent, had come up to London and mingled with highly respectable society there. His person was handsome, his address pleasing, and his expenditure profuse. As for his Jewish proclivities, they must have been of the mildest sort, for he had been known to devour a pork-pie at a railway-station, and had not seldom escorted Miss Dene and Aunt Sophia to church, where he had listened with devout attention to Mr. Strome's sermons. He was a member of some of the most fashionable clubs in London, and his name was among the candidates for several more. Finally, he was unaffectedly desirous to marry Miss Dene, and paid his attentions in the most assiduous and flattering manner.

His only rival was Sebastian Strome, and it was not until almost the last moment that the latter was known to have entered the lists at all. Mary Dene and he had been acquaintances since childhood, but neither of them had ever betrayed a disposition to become anything more. Moreover, during the last year or so Sebastian had been generally in London, where he was pursuing his studies in divinity; and when he came down to Cedarhurst, he had other things to do than to make calls on the heiress. But of course it is unsafe to assert, on the testimony of outward behaviour, what may be the secrets of the heart; and certainly Mr. Selim Fawley and Aunt Sophia would have done well not to rely, in this instance, on appearances.

Fawley and Strome had once been great friends, inseparable at Rugby and during the first year or two of their Oxford career; but then there occurred a quarrel, or at least a coolness. They were no longer seen in each other's company. Strome never vouchsafed any explanation of the change; but it was commonly believed—and Fawley did not deny it—that the breach had been occasioned by some rivalry in scholarship, in which Strome had come off second best. Afterwards, when, as often happened, they met in clubs or drawing-rooms, they noticed each other with civility, but never had any conversation together. There was no cordiality, but neither was there any perceptible animosity; they simply agreed

to let each other alone, and make no fuss about it.

The rumours of Fawley's infatuation for Miss Dene, and of her not unfavourable attitude towards him, were not long in reaching the ears of Mr. and Mrs. Strome, and gave them no pleasure. Not that they had anything against Fawley; but it had long been the unuttered wish of their hearts that Mary should become Sebastian's wife. One day, Sebastian having come down from London for a week's holiday, the subject of the anticipated match happened to be broached at the dinner-table.

"Fawley is a lucky fellow," said Mr. Strome. "There will never be another Mary Dene."

"What has that to do with his luck?" enquired Sebastian, looking up with his quiet, inscrutable face.

"It is said they are going to marry, my son; haven't you heard it?" said Mrs. Strome.

Sebastian filled his wine-glass, and remarked: "Well, Fawley was always a good-looking young gentleman."

"If that were all, I suspect she thinks you as good-looking as he is!" said the minister with a laugh.

"Me! What does a prelate want with a wife?"

"What, indeed, Susan?" rejoined the father, smiling at his wife. "Why did you and I never happen to think of that?"

"I should have liked my son to marry some such woman as Mary," said Mrs. Strome, folding her white hands against the table.

"Well, mother, since you wish it, I will," said Sebastian, and drank off his wine. But the words were not taken seriously.

Either by accident or intention, however, and without saying anything about it to his father and mother, Sebastian Strome spent a part of every day of this week at Dene Hall. Aunt Sophia found that he had a great deal to say to Mary on the subject of the new Home, but she did not think it necessary to make a third at their conversations; there was nothing more to be apprehended from this impassive young man than from Dr. Stemper, or from his own father. Besides, he always treated the elderly, but still coquettish gentlewoman, with a chivalrous gentleness that put it out of her power to be other than well-disposed towards him. On the last day but one before the time fixed for his return to London, she said to him, when he

sought her out in the garden to bid her good evening:

"Really, I don't know what we should have done without you this week, with Selim away: luckily he'll be back to-morrow."

"Mary is a good girl, and much improved of late, under your care. Fawley deserves all the congratulations he will get. Is the date of the marriage settled yet?"

"Why, as to that, you see, there's the formality of the proposal to be gone through with first," said Mrs. Fawley, playing among the fallen leaves with her arched slipper. "We ladies mustn't think about the wedding-day, until after our swains have asked us in so many words whether we'll be married."

"I haven't mentioned the subject to Mary, as she didn't introduce it; but you will give her my kind wishes whenever the right time comes? You mustn't let your nephew be a laggard," he added smiling.

"Oh! my trouble has been to keep him from going too fast. Mary is not like other girls—she won't be driven. However, to-morrow—but this is a great secret!"

"From whom?"

"From everybody; even Mary herself doesn't know it yet. To-morrow, at three o'clock, he is to come here and make his offer. There, sir! See how favoured you are."

"We clerical gentlemen know how to deal with ladies' confidences, Mrs. Fawley. Well, good night. I shall try and get up here to-morrow evening to leave those designs for smoke-flues for the chimneys of Mary's Home—that is, unless I shall be in the way?"

"You know you can never be in the way! Besides, Selim cannot stay later than till five o'clock; he has to take the evening train to London."

"Whether he is accepted or not?"

"They are going to make him a partner in the bank, you see; and to-morrow night they are all to meet at dinner, and get it settled. But, of course, there is really no doubt about her accepting him. I know the dear child's heart so well!"

"A lucky fellow, Fawley—always was," remarked Strome musingly: "and luckiest of all now, to have you for an ally. I wish I could count on a friend like you, when the time comes for me to fall in love," he added, taking her hand; "only in that case I might happen to fall in love with the friend instead of the—object!"

"Oh, you naughty boy! you will never need an ally to help you out in your love-making," returned Mrs. Fawley, looking up at him with that pose of the head that so well became her: "that tongue of yours, and that voice, are allies enough and to spare. There! I protest it's too bad of you to be standing there and making fun of a poor vain old woman;" and with a laugh, and a playful pat with the flower she held in her hand, she dismissed him, and he departed.

The next afternoon Selim duly made his appearance; and he and Mary Dene had a rather prolonged interview in the drawing-room.

He came out at length, alone; and Aunt Sophia, joining him with an interrogative expression, noticed that his face was not altogether so radiant as it should have been.

"How is it, dear boy?" she enquired.

"She says she'll let me know to-morrow."

"Oh, but you should have made her say Yes to-day."

"Get your hat, and come across the short cut with me. Of course, I did what I could, and she was kind enough; but, hang it! she seems to have changed somehow in the last week."

"The trouble is, I fancy, that you showed too much anxiety. When a woman feels she has power, she likes to use it."

"It's deuced inconvenient. What am I to say to-night?"

"My dear boy, don't you fret! She'll be all right to-morrow."

"But they expect me to be able to promise my twenty thousand by the first of January; and how am I to do that, unless I know that she will marry me in December?"

"You can as good as promise it; and if the worst comes to the worst, you will always be as well off as you are now."

Selim pushed out his red under-lip, and drew his wide and short black eyebrows together discontentedly. "You know our interests are the same, Sophia," said he, looking round and fixing his small dark-brown eyes upon her. "If I lose her, you lose your chance of an annuity. You must back me up for your sake as well as mine."

"Selim, dear, do you think I need any other inducement than my affection for you? But I tell you there's no danger. She has told me herself that she believes you are the only man who cares for her on her own account."

"Well, and so I do care for her. By-the-way, I hear Sebastian Strome has been here."

"Pooh, my dear! Do you suppose she would think of a creature with four hundred a year? Besides, they never cared twopence for each other."

"Ah! you don't know Sebastian Strome as I do. He could make himself Archbishop of Canterbury if he chose. However, he'll be too late to make mischief in this business, I suppose. But mind and keep him out of the way until all's settled."

"Trust me!" said Aunt Sophia reassuringly, and reflecting that at that very moment, perhaps, Strome might be on his way to the Hall. They had walked nearly half a mile during this conversation. "I think I'll be going back, dear boy," said she; "and mind you are here as early as you can manage it to-morrow."

They parted, and Aunt Sophia hastily retraced her steps along the narrow path, and should have regained the house in seven or eight minutes. Unfortunately, however, in passing through one of the oak-tree groves, she caught her pretty foot in a creeping root, and fell forward. As she came down on a mass of soft turf and ferns, she was not much hurt so far as that went; but she felt immediately that she had sprained her ankle. It was not a very bad sprain, but she was still a third of a mile from home; and making what speed she could, three-quarters of an hour elapsed before she had covered the distance. It was then six o'clock.

She hobbled into the drawing-room, and found Mary there, apparently asleep, with her face against the sofa-cushion. The girl raised her head, however, and smiled, without seeming quite to know what she was smiling at. Aunt Sophia dropped into a chair with a groan. It was at all events satisfactory that there were no signs of Strome having been there. She looked at Mary, and noticed that her cheeks were wet, and that there was a lovely softness in her great Junonian eyes.

"Oh, my darling, I am suffering so! I stumbled over a nasty root, and sprained my poor ankle. I thought I should have to spend the night in the park."

Mary's gaze rested upon her, but there was a dreamy abstraction in it. She had risen, and was standing with her back to the window, languid, softened, superb; a ray of the afternoon sunshine fell upon her hair, and made a red gold halo round

her head. She was hardly aware of the present; she was living in the hour that had just gone by.

"Yes—I am very glad—sorry. Oh, auntie, he has been here, and I am so happy!" and to her relative's vast surprise the young Juno came forward, and laid her warm white arms about her neck, kissed her yellow cheek, and proceeded to cry gently on her shoulder.

"Well, nothing could be better than this!" said Aunt Sophia to herself, as soon as her surprise allowed her to think; "and Selim was a goose to be anxious, just as I told him." And she proceeded to murmur all manner of sympathetic and appropriate phrases into her niece's ear.

But Mary Dene heard none of them: the voice of an emotion hitherto unknown filled her ears. She did not know that her aunt had sprained her ankle; she had forgotten that such a person as Selim Fawley existed; she was scarcely even aware that she was crying on her aunt's shoulder. She had fallen into a divine dream, wherein new sight and new senses were opened to her—a dream from which she wished never to awake to the old dull-eyed indifference. And when, at length, Aunt Sophia hobbled off to her room, to embrocate her ankle and congratulate herself on the fortunate aspect of affairs, Mary, left to the unlonely solitude of her heart, wandered into the old garden, and paced the prim paths, and put her lips against the drowsy sweetness of the September roses, and gazed at the red sun, sinking earthwards in a peaceful glory that seemed like sympathy from heaven. Gradually shadows crept over the earth; but then the stars took up the tale of the girl's happiness. She paused by the old sundial; leaned her arms on it, and pillowed her cheek upon them. Time had ceased to record itself upon that mystic disk, as upon her own soul. Suddenly she started, with a low shriek of horror! A bat, flitting swiftly along in the twilight, had brushed her face with its noiseless wing. The sacredness and the harmony were dispelled; and the girl hastened back to the house, never to dream that wondrous dream again.

Next morning, at the breakfast-table, Aunt Sophia had the gratification of listening to a full explanation of her niece's distraught behaviour the previous afternoon. But we shall do better to hear the briefer disclosure which was made, about the same hour, at Cedarhurst Vicarage.



Sebastian Strome, who was to return to London by the morning train, having finished his egg and driven his spoon through the bottom of it, remarked: "Fawley is not going to marry Mary Dene, after all."

"Indeed! When did you hear that?" exclaimed the vicar, setting down the coffee-cup which he had been in the act of raising to his mouth.

"At the Hall, yesterday afternoon. She is going to be married, though."

"What a strange—— To whom?"

Sebastian rolled up his napkin and laid it down on the table with a quiet tap, composedly meeting, the while, his parents' questioning looks.

"To me!" he said. "You recommended me some such girl, mother; and since no other such girl seemed to be available, I took Mary herself."

When Mr. Selim Fawley arrived at the Hall, at eleven o'clock, he was met by Aunt Sophia, and after a prolonged interview with her, retired without seeing Mary Dene. But the next day came an admirable letter from him, expressing his best wishes for the lady's happiness, together with a generous and really quite noble recognition of his rival's talents and virtues. It concluded with a hope that Miss Dene would continue to receive him on a friendly footing, and he trusted his conduct would justify her condescension.

"Poor fellow! I could never have loved him, but it will be a privilege to have such a friend," was Mary's comment to her aunt on this epistle; and she added immediately, "Oh, auntie, I do love him so!" But Mrs. Fawley knew what she meant this time. That worthy woman had taken the line of sympathising ardently with her niece's choice, and thereby came in for a great many valuable confidences.

As for society, of course it called Mary Dene a fool, and Sebastian Strome a fortune-hunter; but neither of them seemed to mind that. All these things occurred some three or four months before the date at which our story begins.

#### SPRING TROUTING IN KENT.

It is Holy Thursday, and I admit with sorrow and heartfelt contrition that the remarks which have just issued from my lips are hardly in character with the occasion. For I had made up my mind

to enjoy the opening day at the handiest trout-stream to London, and the rain is pouring in torrents: a drenching downpour of that gelid rain which one feels would be snow if it could, and only waits upon the thermometer to operate a transformation. My friend and companion upon this sorrowful jaunt reproves me as he takes his eternal cigar from his lips. Professor Dunkelwitz is a philosopher. In the University of Dummeresselberg he has clothed his mind by turns with the raiment of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer, and has lapsed at last into a species of mild eclecticism, finding amusement in everything, edification in nothing. He speaks thus: "I bewonder myself much at thy impatience, and enjoy thy spite against thy native climate when thou shouldst rather rejoice at the downfall of silly prophecy and the emptiness of popular beliefs. Did not everyone say in the midst of the dreadful past winter, 'This is good. This is an old-fashioned winter. There will be no trifling, no uncertainty after this; no long cheerless spring as after a mild winter; no capricious smiles and frowns, but genuine winter, true spring, and splendid summer.' You mark what has come of all this. There has been winter since the first of last October; it is colder than it was weeks ago; and my rheumatism, caught at the royal wedding under a treacherous sun, is back again; but I console myself that the superstition of the old-fashioned, seasonable winter is exploded. Ach," and here the professor refreshes himself with a mighty draught of the fluid which he calls "shtout," "the world is very sad, my friend, but is the better for every fallacy shattered into dust."

Parenthetically I may remark that this is a condition into which the professor has resolved six of my largest cigars since he partook of a light breakfast of coffee, eggs, sausages, and beefsteak, finished off with a pot of marmalade; and that as he is, for a foreigner, an enthusiastic angler, I am morally bound to see that he gets some trout to-morrow. Moreover our rooms are engaged in the pleasant townlet by Darent side, and rain or no rain we must go. "What says the French proverb," asks Dunkelwitz: "the wine is drawn and must be drunk. We must go if it snows." I bethink me of a Scotch proverb touching the wilfulness of people who will persist in going to Cnapar—though why any human being not actually demented should feel a burning desire to visit the capital of

Fifeshire is beyond my powers of explanation; but the professor is right after all. We have refused several invitations to quiet country houses because there is nothing to do in them at Easter, and we have now no choice between The Lion at Farningham, and London without a soul to speak to. It is of no use repining. We must out—as the professor puts it—and away we go through a cataract of rain and sleet till we reach the station known as Farningham Road, some couple of miles from our destination, after the manner of country stations generally. A fly is in waiting, and away we go through a blinding rain, blessing our stars that we are dry and comfortable within, till we drive through a charming specimen of all that an English village ought to be to the door of The Lion, somewhat translated during the last few years from The Lion we first knew. Otherwise there is no change in Farningham. Above the bridge, which a hundred years ago was built over the ford, is the flour-mill, and between this and the bridge is a tit-bit of water, strictly preserved with the very practical and rational object of giving the persecuted trout a city of refuge from their tormentors. In this sanctuary repose trout of gigantic size—that is, for all things are comparative, for this part of the Darent. In Wales, for instance, a six-ounce trout will cause a rush for the steel-yard, while in Scotland one of as many pounds will hardly be noticed. In the Darent “pounders” are accepted as good things, and a two-pounder is, as the Scot said of a fifty-pound salmon, a “maist serious grand fish”—wherefore, the two and three pounders lurking under the tail of the mill are viewed with wonder and awe by the anglers of that part of the Darent. The patriarch, who might weigh between three and four pounds, is a fish of a contemptuous and sarcastic turn of mind. Gorged with the fat feeding of the mill he daily takes a quiet swim into the water belonging to The Lion, and looks calmly on the anglers whipping the water for dear life. Among the young hands his appearance creates a sensation; and as he pops in and out of the bridge, and sails majestically past the chestnut-tree, many attempts are made to attract his attention. Every known kind of fly is offered to him, from the red-spinner to the blue dun, from the coachman to the Alexandra, but, alack! all in vain. The big trout has seen this

kind of thing for years, and laughs it to scorn. In sheer spirit of mischief he darts up and down under the chestnut-tree, and watches the attempts made upon him with calm contempt, till, his daily promenade being over, he slowly proceeds up stream, followed by admiring eyes until he is lost in the swirl of the mill-tail. New comers witness this performance with dismay, and go on fishing with less eagerness than before, as if some great possibility had faded out of their lives; but the old hands merely remark that “he” is looking in good condition and colour this year, and having long ago given up all hope of capturing Leviathan, rejoice in his presence as if he were the tutelary stream-god.

Now Friday is the opening day at Farningham, and as it is only Thursday afternoon, and the rain is moreover coming down in torrents, I suggest to the professor, who is admiring the landscape, so far as he can see it through the downpour, that retirement to the rooms allotted to us, and the enjoyment of sound philosophy and good tobacco by the side of a roaring fire, will prove the most agreeable programme for the day. He yields gracefully, and we then proceed on a reconnaissance in search of our apartments—no slight undertaking, for The Lion has gradually broadened down from a little wayside inn to a red-brick hotel. Round the corners of the red brick façade, opposite the Darent, the lawn, and the chestnut tree, it is quite possible to catch a glimpse of the quaint gable-ends of the old house, or rather housea, which, from a vast old-fashioned kitchen-garden, looked upon the road. The old Lion has been only partially masked, and the wayfarer who finds himself ensconced within its thick walls will have reason to congratulate himself on the efficient rampart between himself and the weather. My room is perfect in its way, and so happily placed that no vestige of the modern building offends my eye, which rests contentedly on the queerly-shaped windows and picturesque roof of the wayside inn, enclosing three sides of a garden full of shrubs, just putting forth their early leaves of tender green. The room itself is quite as curious as the out-look from it. A low ceiling is crossed by two enormous beams, and the height of the room is still further reduced by a high wainscot or dado painted green, like the coffered window sills and all the woodwork. Now

green is so eminently fashionable as a colour for walls just at this present moment, that I must warn my readers that the green of my old room at The Lion is neither the Morris, the Peacock, nor one of the bilious shades now believed in as the last expression of artistic decoration; but a bright pea-green, verdant as the coat of the celebrated Mr. Hayne, and matching the leafage outside very nearly. Between this pea-green dado and the whitewashed ceiling is a striped wall-paper, of much the same design as that selected by Polly Eccles and Sam Gerridge for their dwelling when the serious story of "Caste" shall come to an end. There is no compromise of conventional flowers in this remarkable pattern, no attempt to make "daisies pied," and "lady-smocks all silver white," together with ranunculus and sun-flowers, wry-necked as mediæval saints, do all the work of decoration. Far from it: the artist has revelled in roses and hollyhocks with the result of producing a pattern which would drive Mr. W. Burgees out of his mind at one sitting. The carpet is in keeping with the wall-paper, and conveys the impression that it is made of bouquets somewhat the worse for wear, as if after a hard week at theatre, concert, and ball. But in revenge for these evidences of the taste of the generation before last there is the charm of Brummell's great delight, "country washing;" the dimity curtains and other drapery white as snow, and breathing sweetly of lavender. Behind the tall fire-guard, a massive structure, roars a fire worthy of Sheffield itself, and big enough to warm and air an entire family. As the professor drops into a solid oak chair with very pretty brass work in the back he mutters: "It had then its merit, this old unæsthetic England that I have heard of, this England of beef, beer, and port wine, of fox-worship and hatred of foreigners. It was not so bad after all." I take this as kind of the professor, for the rain is now sleety, the cold intense, and all hope of anything like out-door exercise given up; but Dunkelwitz is not in despair, for he is a convert to fly-fishing of only three seasons' standing, and like most young hands he is luxurious in his tackle. He has choice of rods and eke of landing nets, and of flies and casting lines galore. Since he first became a Waltonian, he has never missed a chance of plying the rod, and his passion has stomach for all and every kind of fishing, from gudgeon to salmon. He is quite

enthusiastic about the tiny trout of the Darent, and discussing the character of the flies likely to prove deadly on the morrow, proceeds by the process of exhaustion to remove from his mind all the impossible flies.

Happily just as we are involved in an argument touching the comparative merits of red and yellow duns, the sleet suddenly dies away, and the sun peeps out in a shy, tearful kind of way. My friend springs to his feet at once, and insists that we must explore the fishing, marking the troutful spots and observing the hue of the water. So clear is this, despite the heavy rain, that it is easy to count the fish by scores in the mill water. Having admired these, and glanced at the hundred yards of fishing from the lawn, we next make our way across the bridge and past the grey old church of Farningham, and then turn to the left across a pair of big fields towards the lower part of the Lion water. As we stride over the soddened grass, and a pale daffodil hue streams from the still half-reluctant sun, my German friend, who is perversely determined to be pleased with everything, bursts into something like rhapsody concerning the fiendish season through which we are passing.

"It was not well said by the Frenchman that spring is a shabby excuse for prolonging the winter by three months. That is a bright saying truly, but bright as a mirror, reflecting only surface and telling nought of the inner 'geist' of things. What is the beauty, may I ask, of the Russian, the Canadian springs, which takes you at one step from winter to summer, and shine out revealed at once in their meretricious splendour? There is much more poetry in your abused English winter-spring, held overlong in the cold arms of winter, and yielding reluctantly and with frequent flashes of repentance to the blandishments of summer. How pretty is all this coyness, these frequent relapses into ice, from the moment when the snowdrop peeps out till the perfume of the hawthorn fills the air with sweetness! How altogether indescribably lovely is the modest peering of the primrose and wood-anemone, the shy advances of the daisy, the sullen yielding of the violet. Is there not something more heart-filling, more soul-awakening in the waywardness of thy English spring than in the all-too-sweet richness of that of Provence, with its mass of early



flowers and richness of verdure, soon to be parched into dustiness by a pitiless sun? Are not delicate smiles mingled with an occasional frown more sweet than eternal laughter? What said Schiller of the Vier Elemente, I ask thee? It is true, as thou objectest, that the poet's words refer to that never-to-be-too-much-landed fluid known as punch, but did he not show its composition to be an epitome of life; and what is life?"

This question opens up so vast a field of thought that I call the attention of my companion to the cawing of the rooks, to me the sweetest of all possible lullabys. The rooks have a pleasant time of it at Farningham. Their nests are on every tall tree-top, their cawing so incessant that it forms a kind of thorough bass to the song of the sky-lark and thrush and the twittering of the finches. The air is full of melody as we strike across the field in the direction of the first line of pollard willows, marking the presence of the Darent. Crossing the narrow bridge we find the little stream swollen and swift, ruffled with the wind, and swirling viciously round the corners, wherein many a handsome trout must lie feeding snugly at the bottom on such provender as he can get, and knowing well enough that nature has provided no flies on the surface for his nourishment. Down stream we trudge patiently enough, surveying the scene of forthcoming battle. We have it to ourselves, and walk pleasantly through a wind of surpassingly incisive powers to the limit of the grounds abutting on Frank's Hall, a modernised relic of Tudor times sunk to the level of a mere farmhouse a few years ago, and now a triumph of the genius of comfort, restored and furnished at enormous expense. It is fitted with every possible luxury, and has even a Turkish bath magnificently decorated. On the same line with Frank's is a line of lofty elms, another rookery highly appreciated by the intelligent birds for whose benefit it is maintained; and a little lower down stream is Horton Kirkby, wherein dwells a certain butcher, who captures trout of remarkable size and beauty. By this time the evening has become so bitterly cold that the poetry departs from Dunkelwitz, who murmurs that present schnapps and dinner within some reasonable period will fulfil his yearnings so far as the "immediate" is concerned. So we march gravely back to The Lion, to find that hostelry alive with visitors arrived during our absence —

anglers from north and south; those accustomed to the dainty fishing of the Itchen and Test, and others less delicate but equally killing in their method; fishers who swear that the up-stream cast is your only wear; others who fish down stream for choice, and pooh-pooh the curious in trout flies.

At the square table in the midst of the coffee-room we commence a heavy onslaught on the salmon and lamb, and we note that the conversation is of fishing, and fishing alone. At this early stage of the evening there are, however, far more questions than answers; more seeking for information than giving it. The new comers are anxious to discover the killing fly in the Darent, but the old hands are chary of giving information. A wary, cool old angler with grey hair replies that he has killed Darent trout with every fly in his book at different times, but that he can form no opinion till he has seen the condition of the water and sky on the morrow. There is not much to be got out of him, and the strange fishermen try a communicative young man faultlessly attired in the perfection of fishing costume; but even he, although he apparently "knows something," is hazy and indefinite to an extraordinary degree. Nothing can be more amusing than the dinner of anglers the night before the fray, except the final false confidences in the billiard-room to which we presently repair to play at pool for modest sixpenny lives. There are among the group gathered round the billiard-table men known to be anglers of wondrous skill. There is, for instance, the Scotch gentleman, who is known to have taken a greater weight of fish out of The Lion water than any living person. Whatever the wind, whatever the weather, wherever the place, this redoubtable hero of the rod is, I am told, certain to land a heavy basket. Not, as they tell me enviously, an elegant fisherman, but one who always catches fish. An artistic enthusiast holds that the method of the fortunate Scot is by no means his method, which is, of course, the best, and "how the deuce the man kills as he does is a mystery." This question is answered by a very smart, well-dressed young man, who says he knows for certain that the Scottish champion has a secret fly of mysterious make and shape, acceptable to fish when others are simply loathsome, appetising enough to conjure the wary "*salmo fario*" from snug holes when all others are in

vain. Plots have been laid to discover the make of this fly, and carried out with all that ruthless treachery and cruelty that only anglers and blood-relations are capable of. Once, I am told, a wicked trick was played, unworthy of sportsmen. The famous angler's drink was drugged, and his fly-book stolen, with the result of affording its unscrupulous captors several entirely blank days by the side of excellent trout streams. Whether the flies were only dummies to defeat the inquisitive, like the "bogus" cast always left in the angler's quarters, or not, is not very certain, but the fact remains that the nefarious scheme was an absolute failure. With more talk of duns and spinners, and a few marvellous stories of great trout scaling any number of pounds by "fishermen's weight," the last pool is brought to a division, and the eternal "yellow on red, player in 'and" is hushed. Meanwhile, however, my professor and I have made several compacts with other anglers to fish with them "for company" on the first day of the season. We solemnly swore, by the ashes of Izaak Walton, to begin and "fish fair" and evenly with our friends of this evening, and, moreover, made sundry little speeches to the effect that getting up "at ungodly hours was worthy neither of a gentleman, a sportsman, nor an angler," and that a fair start "after breakfast when the day was well aired" was the best thing in the world in such weather. It was also set forth that trout would not bite early in cold weather, and that a little sun might be waited for with advantage. Having made appointments for eight and nine in the morning, we at last return to the pea-green room with Dunkelwitz much amazed. Lighting his eighteenth cigar he says solemnly: "I bewonder me that you make appointments at eight and nine, and talk of cold weather and late hours. This, my friend, is not a fox-hunt, but a trout-fish." It needs a long explanation to reassure my friend, who is far too young a hand to have the slightest idea of the duplicity of anglers. I explain to him with a pitying smile that the water belonging to The Lion will be crowded with anglers in the morning early, and that nobody believed a word anybody said in the billiard-room. Dunkelwitz stares: "I had thought the Englander a truth-loving man. Yet another illusion gone." I repeat that all is fair in love, war, horse-dealing, picture-dealing, angling, and a few other things,

and that with these exceptions we English confine ourselves to the severest truth, and add to this asseveration: "We have appointments at eight and nine—mind you are up and ready at six." The pale blue eyes of Dunkelwitz flash out a response, he is gone, and the clock strikes eleven as I plunge under the sheets in my pea-green chamber, and listen, or seem to listen, to the roaring of the fire as I doze off to sleep.

It is cold—infernally cold. The fire is out, the sun is not up, and why should I—wretched mortal that I am—take precedence of Phœbus Apollo. I hesitate, and still hesitate, when a fearful uproar at my door announces the arrival of my German friend. The first intelligible sound is "Sechs uhr gut geschlagen," and I flounder into my clothes to the tune of a lecture from the apostle of the veracities of yester even. "Der Schottländer ist schon aus," adds Dunkelwitz grumpily, as a thrill of terror runs through my veins. Has somebody got the start of us after all? Horrible thought! Luckily, all is ready, and a moment suffices to grasp one's gear and dash out on to the lawn. It is too true. Our friends whom we were to meet at eight and nine have doubtless ordered themselves to be called at six and seven, but we are forestalled nevertheless. "Firm and erect the Caledonian" stands, his huge blue bonnet on the back of his head, and his robust form displayed to the best advantage in a plain workmanlike fishing suit, which has obviously seen service by flood and field. By Jove, he has got one, and we are at his elbow as he lands a plump three-quarter-pounder in famous colour and condition. Despite the severe winter the spots gleam rosy-red from his fine dark sides—together a nice plump "takeable" fish anywhere. I note Dunkelwitz trying to see the magic fly, but he is no more successful than myself; and while we are getting ready we have the satisfaction of seeing the Scot take out a brace of nice fish, as like the last as if they were made in the same mould. Five brace and a half has that hardy Norseman conjured out of the little stream in an hour and a half, with the water just about freezing point, and the icy wind blowing a sort of polar hurricane. Then he makes off, and we flog the lawn water for an hour with the result of a brace of fish. As eight o'clock approaches our friends of last night appear one by one, some clad in garments fearfully and

wonderfully made with mysterious pockets in unsuspected places, fishing-baskets of amazing newness and unnecessary amplitude, fly-books, and the regulation coronet of flies around the hat brim. Good fellows all and quiet, going about their sport with a single remark concerning the weather, and fishing away with all the patience and seriousness demanded by the occupation. Towards nine o'clock, however, there is a general determination towards breakfast, and the consumption of the excellent fare of The Lion is swift and great. Salmon and soles, home-cured ham and new-laid eggs, mutton chops and kidneys in relays, flanked as it were by huge joints of cold meat and great edifices of pie-crust, and guarded by outworks of jam and marmalade, vanished like a dream before the little army of anglers. Few have had luck approaching that of the North Briton, whose deeds and probable whereabouts afford a theme for speculation; but all are in high spirits and gigantic appetite. Anglers, by-the-way, have a dash of Dagald Dalgetty in them. They love to take in "provant," and invariably eat as if the next meal were by no means to be counted upon with certainty. They are infected as it were with a superstition that the fish "might begin to rise" just at luncheon-time, and of course it would never do to leave them at such a moment. Breakfast demolished, there is a move for the lower water; not general, but furtive, the fishers dropping away one or two at a time, for there is strong competition for good places on The Lion opening day. Once more past the grey old church and the hostelry sacred to the Bull, and across the meadows dotted with shy primroses and daisies peering out at the chilling blast, but yet reluctant to throw open their outward wraps. The perpetual chant of the rooks is going on, the church-bells are ringing, the skylark is lavish of his sweet song. Over the red roofs of the houses hangs the smoke, blown hither and thither by the cutting blast. Despite Dunkelwitz's æsthetic view Farningham will be prettier presently, when the long series of blossom commences with almond, apple and pear, plum and cherry, with horse-chestnut and sweet hawthorn to bring up the rear of the floral army which precedes the roses and honeysuckle, the hollyhocks and peonies of summer, never more lovely than when embedded in these Kentish chalk-hills. There is little suggestive of the soft breath of June in the air this morning,

and our fingers grow blue as we tempt the swirling eddies ridged and furrowed by the chilling north-easter. It is not all labour in vain, for a few plump victims reward our patience, and the enthusiasm of Dunkelwitz knows no bounds. I may premise that my eminent Teuton displays very little of that tendency to nervousness which affects weaker vessels towards mid-day, and is due mainly to the want of sustenance. He is far too wise a man to separate himself by any great distance from the commissariat. In one of the pockets of his roomy fishing-jacket, he, unheeding the copious breakfast taken between eight and nine o'clock, had bestowed the butt-end, weighing a pound or so, of a magnificent "Corvelat-Wurst," or sausage of finely minced meat highly spiced, together with a few French rolls. Shortly after eleven he draws my attention to the fact that a slice of sausage fits a slice of roll very neatly, and that a sandwich of this kind is a most attractive kind of "circular." This consumed, he pulls from the companion-pocket a huge flask of "Kümmel," and explains to me that taken in the morning, and in conjunction with sausage, this caraway cordial is a sovereign remedy against indigestion, colic, biliousness, rheumatism, and the gout. The medicament is at least pleasant, and having thus supplied ourselves with animal heat, we fish on with varying success till human nature can endure the wind no longer, and we seek shelter from a shower of hail followed by a downfall of sleet. Fishing is clearly over for to-day at least. One by one from Otford, where the big trout lurk, from Eynsford, from Horton-Kirkby, and other famed spots, the anglers drop in at The Lion, where they find the salt-fish and hot-cross buns all gone long ago, and soles and joint in strong demand. Dunkelwitz and I fare well on a slice of cod-fish—trout being reserved for our London friends—a certain "target" of lamb, and an omelette aux fines herbes of admirable flavour. As it is Good Friday, there is no billiard-room to-night, and the guests fill the smoking-room to the brim. If the talk was of fish fishy last night, how much the more is it so now! I hear of forty-two dozen of little ones taken with a couple of rods, and more interesting news of three and four pounders not far off. "Half-a-dozen in a day," adds my informant. "Real salmon-trout; they put in a lot years ago, and you can have



a day when you like. I can take you, and know every inch of the water." Many readers of *ALL THE YEAR ROUND* would, doubtless, like to know too; but their servant is a true angler, and never forgets the golden rule: "It's canny to say nowt."

#### DAISIES.

How bare the garden borders lie  
Beneath a changeful, dappled sky!  
The snow has passed away;  
But sudden gusts of sleet and rain  
Beat hard against the window-pane,  
This February day.  
Yet in the pauses of the storm  
The mellow sunshine flickers warm  
On mossy garden-ways;  
The thrush we fed the winter long  
Pours forth at intervals his song  
Of love and lengthening days.  
The plot of freshening grassy sward,  
In all its length is thickly starred  
With daisies gold and white,  
That skyward lift, in fearless grace,  
Through sun and shower each smiling face,  
With equable delight.  
They crave not culture's cunning care,  
But blossom brightly everywhere,  
With spring's first breeze and beam;  
Coeval with the thrushes' song,  
They bloom the sunny summer long,  
By meadow, lawn, and stream.  
We tread them down with hasty feet,  
To pull some fairer blossom, sweet  
With coveted perfume;  
But from the pressure rough and rude  
They gaily spring, afresh endued  
With honest, hopeful bloom.  
They mind us in their silent way,  
Of love that blesses every day  
Our pathway on the earth;  
Of love that wakes while calm we sleep,  
Of love that aches when'er we weep,  
Yet counted little worth.  
Of love we trample down to reach  
A lighter love, that will but teach  
Our hearts a dreadful care;  
Of love that springs, as daisies do,  
For ever strong, for ever new,  
In rapture or despair.  
They mind us in their humble guise  
Of homely duties that arise  
In every human life;  
We tread these lowly duties down,  
And grasp at shadowy flowers to crown  
A vain ideal strife.  
Yet in each path, like daisies set,  
These humbler duties still are met;  
God guide our feeble will!  
That when our wild ambitions fade,  
We, turning humbly to the shade,  
May find our daisies still.

#### VIXEN.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," &c. &c.

#### CHAPTER XLIV. "IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN."

"THEY are the most curious pair of lovers I ever saw in my life," said one of the visitors at Ashbourne, a young lady who had been engaged to be married more

than once, and might fairly consider herself an authority upon such matters. "One never sees them together."

"They are cousins," replied her companion. "What can you expect from a courtship between cousins? It must be the most humdrum affair possible."

"All courtships are humdrum, unless there is opposition from parents, or something out of the common order to enliven them," said somebody else.

The speakers were a party of young ladies, who were getting through an idle hour after breakfast in the billiard-room.

"Lady Mabel is just the sort of girl no man could be desperately in love with," said another. "She is very pretty, and elegant, and accomplished, and all that kind of thing—but she is so overpoweringly well satisfied with herself that it seems superfluous for anyone to admire her."

"In spite of that I know of someone in this house who does immensely admire her," asserted the young lady who had spoken first. "Much more than I should approve if I were Mr. Vawdrey."

"I think I know——" began somebody, and then abruptly remarked: "What a too ridiculous stroke! And I really thought I was going to make a cannon."

This sudden change in the current of the talk was due to the appearance of the subject of this friendly disquisition. Lady Mabel had that moment entered, followed by Lord Mallow, not intent on billiards, like the frivolous damsels assembled round the table. There were bookcases all along one side of the billiard-room, containing the surplus books that had overrun the shelves in the library; and Mabel had come to look for a particular volume among these. It was a treatise upon the antiquities of Ireland. Lord Mallow and Lady Mabel had been disputing about the Round Towers.

"Of course you are right," said the Irishman, when she had triumphantly exhibited a page which supported her side of the argument. "What a wonderful memory you have! What a wife you would make for a statesman! You would be worth half-a-dozen secretaries!"

Mabel blushed, and smiled faintly, with lowered eyelids.

"Do you remember that concluding picture in *My Novel*," she asked, "where Violante tempts Harley Lestrangle from his idle musing over Horace to toil through blue-books; and, when she is stealing softly from the room, he detains her, and

bids her copy an extract for him? 'Do you think I would go through this labour,' he says, 'if you were not to halve the success? Halve the labour as well.' I have always envied Violante that moment in her life."

"And who would not envy Harley such a wife as Violante," returned Lord Mallow, "if she was like—the woman I picture her?"

Three hours later Lord Mallow and Lady Mabel met by accident in the garden. It was an afternoon of breathless heat and golden sunlight, the blue ether without a cloud—a day on which the most restless spirit might be content to yield to the drowsiness of the atmosphere, and lie at ease upon the sunburnt grass and bask in the glory of summer. Lord Mallow had never felt so idle, in the whole course of his vigorous young life.

"I don't know what has come to me," he said to himself; "I can't settle to any kind of work; and I don't care a straw for going sight-seeing with a pack of nonentities."

A party had gone off in a drag, soon after breakfast, to see some distant ruins; and Lord Mallow had refused to be of that party, though it included some of the prettiest girls at Ashbourne. He had stayed at home, on pretence of writing important letters, but had not, so far, penned a line. "It must be the weather," said Lord Mallow.

An hour or so after luncheon he strolled out into the gardens, having given up all idea of writing those letters. There was a wide lawn, that sloped from the terrace in front of the drawing-room windows, a lawn encircled by a belt of carefully-chosen timber. It was not very old timber, but it was sufficiently umbrageous. There were tulip-trees, and copper-beeches, and Douglas pines, and deodaras. There were shrubs of every kind, and winding paths under the trees, and rustic benches here and there to repose the wearied traveller.

On one of these benches, placed in a delicious spot, shaded by a group of pines, commanding the wide view of valley and distant hill far away towards Ringwood, Lord Mallow found Lady Mabel seated reading. She was looking delightfully cool amidst the sultry heat of the scene, perfectly dressed in soft white muslin, with much adornment of delicate lace and pale-hued ribbon: but she was not looking happy. She was gazing at the open volume on her knee, with fixed and dreamy

eyes that saw not the page; and as Lord Mallow came very near, with steps that made no sound on the fallen pine-needles, he saw that there were tears upon her drooping eyelids.

There are moments in every man's life when impulse is stronger than discretion. Lord Mallow gave the reins to impulse now, and seated himself by Lady Mabel's side, and took her hand in his, with an air of sympathy so real that the lady forgot to be offended.

"Forgive me for having surprised your tears," he murmured gently.

"I am very foolish," she said, blushing deeply as she became aware of the hand clasping hers, and suddenly withdrawing her own; "but there are passages of Dante that are too pathetic."

"Oh, it was Dante!" exclaimed Lord Mallow, with a disappointed air.

He looked down at the page on her lap.

"Yes, naturally."

She had been reading about Paolo and Francesca—that one episode, in all the catalogue of sin and sorrow, which melts every heart; a page at which the volume seems to open of its own accord.

Lord Mallow leaned down and read the lines in a low voice, slowly, with considerable feeling; and then he looked softly up at Mabel Ashbourne, and at the landscape lying below them, in all the glow and glory of the summer light, and looked back to the lady, with his hand still on the book.

The strangeness of the situation: they two alone in the garden, unseen, unheard by human eye or ear; the open book between them—a subtle bond of union—hinting at forbidden passion.

"They were deeply to be pitied," said Lord Mallow, meaning the guilty lovers.

"It was very sad," murmured Lady Mabel.

"But they were neither the first nor the last who have found out too late that they were created to be happy in each other's love, and had by an accident missed that supreme chance of happiness," said Lord Mallow, with veiled intention.

Mabel sighed, and took the book from the gentleman's hand, and drew a little farther off on the bench. She was not the kind of young woman to yield tremblingly to the first whisper of an unauthorised love. It was all very well to admire Francesca, upon strictly æsthetic grounds, as the perfection of erring womanhood, beautiful even in her guilt. Francesca had lived so long ago—in days so

entirely mediæval, that one could afford to regard her with indulgent pity. But it was not to be supposed that a modern duke's daughter was going to follow that unfortunate young woman's example, and break plighted vows. Betrothal, in the eyes of so exalted a moralist as Lady Mabel, was a tie but one degree less sacred than marriage.

"Why did you not go to see the ruins?" she asked, resuming her society tone.

"Because I was in a humour in which ruins would have been unutterably odious. Indeed, Lady Mabel, I am just now very much of Macbeth's temper, when he began to be a-weary of the sun."

"Has the result of the session disappointed you?"

"Naturally. When was that ever otherwise? Parliament opens full of promise, like a young king who has just ascended the throne, and everybody is to be made happy; all burdens are to be lightened, the seeds of all good things that have been hidden deep in the earth through the slow centuries are to germinate all at once, and blossom, and bear fruit. And the session comes to an end; and lo! a great many good things have been talked about, and no good thing has been done. That is in the nature of things. No, Lady Mabel, it is not that which makes me unhappy."

He waited for her to ask him what his trouble was, but she kept silence.

"No," he repeated, "it is not that."

Again there was no reply; and he went on awkwardly, like an actor who has missed his cue.

"Since I have known you I have been at once too happy and too wretched. Happy—unspeakably happy in your society; miserable in the knowledge that I could never be more to you than an unit in the crowd."

"You were a great deal more to me than that," said Mabel softly. She had been on her guard against him just now, but when he thus abased himself before her she took pity upon him, and became dangerously amiable. "I shall never forget your kindness about those wretched verses."

"I will not hear you speak ill of them," cried Lord Mallow indignantly. "You have but shared the common fate of genius, in having a mind in advance of your age."

Lady Mabel breathed a gentle sigh of resignation.

"I am not so weak as to think myself a genius," she murmured; "but I venture

to hope my poor verses will be better understood twenty years hence than they are now."

"Undoubtedly!" cried Lord Mallow, with conviction. "Look at Wordsworth; in his lifetime the general reading public considered him a prosy old gentleman, who twaddled pleasantly about lakes and mountains, and pretty little peasant girls. The world only awakened ten years ago to the fact of his being a great poet and a sublime philosopher; and I shouldn't be very much surprised," added Lord Mallow meditatively, "if in ten years more the world were to go to sleep again and forget him."

Lady Mabel looked at her watch.

"I think I will go in and give mamma her afternoon cup of tea," she said.

"Don't go yet," pleaded Lord Mallow, "it is only four, and I know the duchess does not take tea till five. Give me one of your last hours. A lady who is just going to be married is something like Socrates after his sentence. Her friends surround her; she is in their midst, smiling, serene, diffusing sweetness and light; but they know she is going from them—they are to lose her, yes, to lose her almost as utterly as if she were doomed to die."

"That is taking a very dismal view of marriage," said Mabel, pale and trifling nervously with her watch-chain.

This was the first time Lord Mallow had spoken to her of the approaching event.

"Is it not like death? Does it not bring change and parting to old friends? When you are Lady Mabel Vawdrey, can I ever be with you as I am now? You will have new interests, you will be shut in by a network of new ties. I shall come some morning to see you amidst your new surroundings, and shall find a stranger. My Lady Mabel will be dead and buried."

There is no knowing how long Lord Mallow might have meandered on in this dismal strain, if he had not been seasonably interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Vawdrey, who came sauntering along the winding shrubbery-walk, with his favourite pointer Hecate at his heels. He advanced towards his betrothed at the leisurely pace of a man whose courtship is over, whose fate is sealed, and from whom society exacts nothing further, except a decent compliance with the arrangements other people make for him.

He seemed in no wise disconcerted at



finding his sweetheart and Lord Mallow seated side by side alone in that romantic and solitary spot. He pressed Mabel's hand kindly, and gave the Irishman a friendly nod.

"What have you been doing with yourself all the morning, Roderick?" asked Lady Mabel, with that half-reproachful air which is almost the normal expression of a betrothed young lady in her converse with her lover.

"Oh, pottering about at Briarwood. The workmen are such fools. I am making some slight alterations in the stables, on a plan of my own—putting in mangers, and racks, and pillars, and partitions, making sanitary improvements and so on—and I have to contend with so much idiocy in our local workmen. If I did not stand by, and see drain-pipes put in and connections made, I believe the whole thing would go wrong."

"It must be very dreadful for you," exclaimed Lady Mabel.

"It must be intolerable!" cried Lord Mallow. "What, when the moments are golden, when 'Love takes up the glass of Time, and turns it in his glowing hands,' when 'Love takes up the harp of life, and smites on all the chords with might,' you have to devote your morning to watching the laying of drain-pipes and digging of sewers! I cannot imagine a more afflicted man."

Lady Mabel saw the sneer, but her betrothed calmly ignored it.

"Of course it's a nuisance," he said carelessly; "but I had rather be my own clerk of the works than have the whole thing botched. I thought you were going to Wellbrook Abbey with the house party, Mabel?"

"I know every stone of the Abbey by heart. No; I have been dawdling about the grounds all the afternoon. It is much too warm for riding or driving."

Lady Mabel strangled an incipient yawn. She had not yawned once in all her talk with Lord Mallow. Rorie stifled another, and Lord Mallow walked up and down among the pine-needles, like a caged lion. It would have been polite to leave the lovers to themselves, perhaps. They might have family matters to discuss, settlements, wedding presents, Heaven knows what. But Lord Mallow was not going to leave them alone. He was in a savage humour, in which the petty rules and regulations of a traditional etiquette were as nothing to him. So he stayed, pacing restlessly, with his hands in his pockets, and inwardly

delighted at the stupid spectacle presented by the affianced lovers, who had nothing to say to each other, and were evidently bored to the last degree by their own society.

"This is the deplorable result of trying to ferment the small beer of cousinly affection into the Maronean wine of passionate love," thought Lord Mallow. "Idiotic parents have imagined that these two people ought to marry, because they were brought up together, and the little girl took kindly to the little boy. What little girl does not take kindly to anything in the shape of a boy, when they are both in the nursery? Hence these tears."

"I am going to pour out mamma's tea," Lady Mabel said presently, keenly sensible of the stupidity of her position. "Will you come, Roderick? Mamma will be glad to know that you are alive. She was wondering about you all the time we were at luncheon."

"I ought not to have been off duty so long," Mr. Vawdrey answered meekly; "but if you could only imagine the stupidity of those bricklayers! The day before yesterday I found half-a-dozen stalwart fellows sitting upon a wall, with their hands in their corduroy pockets, smoking short pipes, and, I believe, talking politics. They pretended to be at a standstill because their satellites—the men who hold their hods and mix their mortar—had not turned up. 'Don't disturb yourselves, gentlemen,' I said. 'There's nothing like taking things easy. It's a time-job. I'll send you the morning papers and a can of beer.' And so I did, and since that day, do you know, the fellows have worked twice as hard. They don't mind being bullied; but they can't stand chaff."

"What an interesting bit of character," said Lady Mabel, with a faintly perceptible sneer. "Worthy of Henri Constant."

"May I come to the duchess's kettledrum?" asked Lord Mallow humbly.

"By all means," answered Mabel. "How fond you gentlemen pretend to be of afternoon tea, nowadays! But I don't believe it is the tea you really care for. It is the gossip you all like. Darwin has found out that the male sex is the vain sex; but I don't think he has gone so far as to discover another great truth. It is the superior sex for whom scandal has the keenest charm."

"I have never heard the faintest hiss of the serpent slander at the duchess's tea-table," said Lord Mallow.

"No; we are dreadfully behind the

age," assented Lady Mabel. "We contrive to exist without thinking ill of our neighbours."

They all three sauntered towards the house, choosing the sheltered ways, and skirting the broad sunny lawn, whose velvet sward, green even in this tropical July, was the result of the latest improvements in cultivation, ranging from such simple stimulants as bone-dust and wood-ashes to the latest development of agricultural chemistry. Lady Mabel and her companions were for the most part silent during this leisurely walk home, and when one of them hazarded an observation, the attempt at conversation had a forced air, and failed to call forth any responsive brilliancy in the others.

The duchess looked provokingly cool and comfortable in her morning-room, which was an airy apartment on the first floor, with a wide window opening upon a rustic balcony, verandahed and trellised, garlanded with passion-flowers and Australian clematis, and altogether sheltered from sun and wind. The most reposeful sofas, the roomiest arm-chairs in all the house were to be found here, and covered with a cool shining chintz of the good old-fashioned sort, apple-blossoms and spring-flowers on a white ground.

A second window in a corner opened into a small fernery, in which there was a miniature waterfall that trickled with a slumberous sound over moss-grown rock-work. There could hardly have been a better room for afternoon tea on a sultry summer day; and afternoon tea at Ashbourne included iced coffee, and the finest peaches and nectarines that were grown in the county; and when the duke happened to drop in for a chat with his wife and daughter, sometimes went as far as sherry and Angostura bitters.

The duchess received her daughter with her usual delighted air, as if the ethereal-looking young lady in India muslin had verily been a goddess.

"I hope you have not been fatiguing yourself in the orchid-houses on such an afternoon as this, my pet," she said anxiously.

"No, indeed, mamma; it is much too warm for the orchid-houses. I have been in the shrubbery reading, or trying to read, but it is dreadfully sleepy weather. We shall all be glad to get some tea. Oh, here it comes."

A match pair of footmen brought a pair of silver trays: caddy, kettle, and teapot, and cups and saucers on one; and a lavish

pile of fruit, such as Lance would have loved to paint, on the other.

Lady Mabel took up the quaint little silver caddy and made the tea. Roderick began to eat peaches. Lord Mallow, true to his nationality, seated himself by the duchess, and paid her a compliment.

"There are some more parcels for you, Mabel," said the fond mother presently, glancing at a side-table, where sundry neatly-papered packets suggested jewellery.

"More presents, I suppose," the young lady murmured languidly. "Now I do hope people have not sent me any more jewellery. I wear so little, and I——"

Have so much, she was going to say, but checked herself on the verge of a remark that savoured of vulgar arrogance.

She went on with the tea-making, uncurious as to the inside of those dainty-looking parcels. She had been surfeited with presents before she left her nursery. A bracelet or a locket more or less could not make the slightest difference in her feelings. She entertained a condescending pity for the foolish people who squandered their money in buying her such things, when they ought to know that she had a superfluity of much finer jewels than any they could give her.

"Don't you want to see your presents?" asked Rorie, looking at her, in half-stupid wonder at such calm superiority.

"They will keep till we have done tea. I can guess pretty well what they are like. How many church-services have people sent me, mamma?"

"I think the last made fourteen," murmured the duchess, trifling with her tea-spoon.

"And how many Christian Years?"

"Nine."

"And how many copies of Doré's Idylls of the King?"

"One came this morning from Mrs. Scobel. I think it was the fifth."

"How many lockets inscribed with A. E. I. or Mizpah?"

"My darling, I could not possibly count those. There were three more by post this morning."

"You see there is rather a sameness in these things," said Lady Mabel; "and you can understand why I am not rabidly curious about the contents of those parcels. I feel sure there will be another Mizpah among them."

She had received Lord Mallow's tribute—an Irish jaunting-car, built upon the newest lines, and altogether a most perfect vehicle for driving to a meet in, so light

and perfectly balanced as to travel safely through the ruttiest glade in Mark Ash.

Rorie's gifts had all been given, so Lady Mabel could afford to make light of the unopened parcels without fear of wounding the feelings of anyone present.

They were opened by-and-by, when the duke came in from his farm, sorely disturbed in his mind at the serious indisposition of a prize cart-horse, which hapless animal had been fattened to such an inflammatory condition that in his case the commonest ailment might prove deadly. Depressed by this calamity, the duke required to be propped up with sherry and Angostura bitters, which tonic mixture was presently brought to him by one of the match footmen, who looked very much as if he were suffering from the same plethoric state that was likely to prove fatal to the cart-horse. Happily, the footman's death would be but a temporary inconvenience. The duke had not given six hundred guineas for him.

Lady Mabel opened her parcels, in the hope of distracting her father from the contemplation of his trouble.

"From whom can this be," she asked wonderingly, "with the Jersey post-mark? Do I know anyone in Jersey?"

Roderick grew suddenly crimson, and became deeply absorbed in the business of peeling a nectarine.

"I surely cannot know anyone in Jersey," said Lady Mabel, in languid wonderment. "It is an altogether impossible place. Nobody in society goes there. It sounds almost as disreputable as Boulogne."

"You'd better open the packet," said Rorie, with a quiver in his voice.

"Perhaps it is from some of your friends," speculated Mabel.

She broke the seal, and tore the cover off a small morocco case.

"What a lovely pair of earrings!" she exclaimed.

Each eardrop was a single turquoise, almost as large, and quite as clear in colour, as a hedge-sparrow's egg. The setting was Roman, exquisitely artistic.

"Now I can forgive anyone for sending me such jewellery as that," said Lady Mabel. "It is not the sort of thing one sees in every jeweller's shop."

Rorie looked at the blue stones with rueful eyes. He knew them well. He had seen them contrasted with ruddy chestnut hair, and the whitest skin in Christendom—or at any rate the whitest he had ever seen, and a man's world can be but the world he knows.

"There is a letter," said Lady Mabel. "Now I shall find out all about my mysterious Jersey friend."

She read the letter aloud:

"Les Tourelles, Jersey, July 25th.

"DEAR LADY MABEL,—I cannot bear that your wedding-day should go by without bringing you some small token of regard from your husband's old friend. Will you wear these earrings now and then, and believe that they come from one who has nothing but good wishes for Rorie's wife?—Yours very truly,

"VIOLET TEMPEST."

"Why, they are actually from your old playfellow!" cried Mabel, with a laugh that had not quite a genuine ring in its mirth. "The young lady who used to follow the staghounds, in a green habit with brass buttons, ever so many years ago, and who insisted on calling you Rorie. She does it still, you see. How very sweet of her to send me a wedding present. I ought to have remembered. I heard something about her being sent off to Jersey by her people, because she had grown rather incorrigible at home."

"She was not incorrigible, and she was not sent off to Jersey," said Roderick grimly. "She left home of her own free will; because she could not hit it with her stepfather."

"That is another way of expressing it, but I think we both mean pretty much the same thing," retorted Mabel. "But I don't want to know why she went to Jersey. She has behaved very sweetly in sending me such a pretty letter; and when she is at home again I shall be very happy to see her at my garden-parties."

Lord Mallow had no share in this conversation, for the duke had buttonholed him, and was giving him a detailed account of the cart-horse's symptoms.

The little party dispersed soon after this, and did not foregather again until just before dinner, when the people who had been to see the ruins were all assembled, full of their day's enjoyment, and of sundry conversational encounters which they had had with the natives of the district. They gave themselves the usual airs which people who have been laboriously amusing themselves inflict upon those wiser individuals who prefer the passive pleasures of repose, and made a merit of having exposed themselves to the meridian sun in the pursuit of archaeological knowledge.

Lady Mabel looked pale and weary all that evening. Roderick was so evidently



distract that the good-natured duke thought that he must be worrying himself about the cart-horse, and begged him to make his mind easy, as it was possible the animal might even yet recover.

Later on in the evening Lady Mabel and Lord Mallow sat in the conservatory and talked Irish politics, while Rorie and the younger members of the house party played Nap. The conservatory was deliciously cool on this summer evening, dimly lighted by lamps that were half hidden among the palms and orange-trees. Lady Mabel and her companion could see the stars shining through the open doorway, and the mystical darkness of remote woods. Their voices were hushed; there were pauses of silence in their talk. Never had the stirring question of Home Rule been more interesting.

Lady Mabel did not go back to the drawing-room that evening. There was a door leading from the conservatory to the hall; and while Rorie and the young people were still somewhat noisily engaged in the game of Napoleon, Lady Mabel went out to the hall with Lord Mallow in attendance upon her. When he had taken her candle from the table and lighted it, he paused for a moment or so before he handed it to her, looking at her very earnestly all the while, as she stood at the foot of the staircase, with saddened face and downcast eyes, gravely contemplative of the stair-carpet.

"Is it—positively—too late?" he asked.

"You must feel and know that it is so," she answered.

"But it might have been?"

"Yes," she murmured with a faint sigh, "it might have been."

He gave her the candlestick, and she went slowly upstairs, without a word of good-night. He stood in the hall, watching the slim figure as it ascended, ærial and elegant in its palely-tinted drapery.

"It might have been," he repeated to himself: and then he lighted his candle and went slowly up the staircase. He was in no humour for billiards, cigars, or noisy masculine talk to-night. Still less was he inclined to be at ease and to make merry with Roderick Vawdrey.

### MY LAND OF BEULAH.

A STORY IN FIFTEEN CHAPTERS. CHAPTER VII.

TEN minutes later Ivanhoe lay on the floor of the music-room, and I was wandering about the wood, and round the meadow, where Daisy stood knee-deep in

king-cups and rushes by the pool beneath the alder-trees.

What had I seen in the face of the old mirror?

Miss Mary must have risen and left her writing-table, going out by the door leading into the hall, for when I looked up from my book her place was empty, and as I looked another figure took that place. It was Eulalie—yet another Eulalie to any I had as yet known. Hurry and eagerness were expressed in every line of her beautiful face, in each movement of her form; fear, too, was written in the quick glance now and again cast over her shoulder. She hastily searched for something, then, lifting a letter from the table, gave one more swift, cautious look towards the hall—pulled the paper from the envelope, read it, replaced it—looked up with a strange, defiant smile playing round her lips—and glided quickly from the room.

I flung my book upon the floor, and in a moment stood beside Miss Mary's desk. There lay an unsealed letter. Without a moment's thought I raised it and turned it to look at the address. Yes, it was as I had fancied. "Mrs. Langley, The Rectory, Hazledene, Cumberland."

It came to this then.

Eulalie had had some reason to fear what Miss Mary might say of her. Urged on by this dread, she had been guilty of a dishonourable action. My idea was then—and added experience of life has given me no reason to alter it—that the educated gentlewoman who will dishonourably read a letter not intended for her is capable of anything, and that her wrong-doings will be limited only by her opportunities. Thus then had my idol fallen from the pedestal whereon my love had set her.

Hurrying to the garden, I met Miss Mary and Miss Jane. They were speaking earnestly, and, I doubted not, the writer of the letter to Mrs. Langley had sought "Sister Jane" to give an opinion on its contents. I stood aside to let them pass; and, as they did so, Miss Mary touched my flushed cheek with her finger.

"What have you been doing, child?" she said; "reading yourself into a fever over some book or other? Go into the wood and see if there are any violets left; the little basket on my desk is empty."

The mention of her desk brought the colour still more hotly to my face. Happily the two ladies were greatly absorbed in some topic of unusual interest, and my confusion passed without further notice.

I was longing to get out into the open air, but, before getting my tippet and hat, went into the lower schoolroom, to see if Eulalie chanced to be there. I found her, and no fairer picture of the quiet fulfilment of duty could have been presented to the eye than that on which I gazed, door in hand. She sat on a low chair near the window, and grouped about her were three of the youngest members of our flock. Of these, the tiniest maid, Amy Ladbroke, stood resting her round red arms on Miss Le Breton's knee, her dark eyes fixed upon her face.

Hunched up in a most ungraceful attitude upon a neighbouring form, and listening to Eulalie's fairy tale with her mouth agape, as though her hearing were in some way assisted thereby, sat Louisa Brandon, of whom Mam'zelle presently caught sight. With lively gesticulations and much excitement, the little Frenchwoman dilated upon the "affreux" state of mademoiselle's "deportment" at the present moment; adding, that if "ce gentil Monsieur José" could see her in such an attitude, he would——what he would do Mam'zelle did not specify, but with a shrug of her neat shoulders passed on, leaving the penitent Louisa sitting bolt upright, with her clumsy feet displayed to the utmost in the "first position." Why did I linger to watch these things? Why did I feel as if there were a certain fascination to me in letting my eyes rest on Eulalie's sleek head, bent towards the little ones gathered about her?

I can hardly tell, if it were not a sort of longing to give her a chance of explaining about the letter; a wholly foolish feeling that she must know by instinct that I had seen her read what did not belong to her, and that she stood arraigned before that troubled judge, my heart.

As Mam'zelle stood gesticulating before Louisa, Eulalie's eyes, full of laughing amusement, met mine over Amy's curly head. In their limpid depths was no shadow of a wrong done; they were unconscious, full of gentle merriment, with a sadness underlying all as usual—nothing more.

"Don't say, Nellie, de-ar," pleaded Amy, pointing out her rose-red lips; "do let us fin'is our tudy."

My countenance was doubtless suggestive of conversation, and the little maid craved for silence just then.

I was turning to leave the room when Eulalie spoke.

"Nell, dear, do you know if Miss Mary has answered your father's letter?"

As she spoke she laid her hand on Amy's shoulder, to inculcate patience.

"Yes—no—I'm not sure; perhaps she has," I stammered.

"Oo's dot a welly yed face, Nellie," put in Amy, gravely observant.

Which of us looked like a culprit at that moment, Eulalie or I?

"It does not matter, only I can't help feeling anxious, and I thought she might have told you. Now, Amy, let us finish our 'tody,' darling."

One defiant glance the little one flung at me, as she settled herself down into a comfortable listening attitude; and then the thread of the fairy-tale was taken up again:

"Truth was a lovely little fairy all dressed in a glistening white dress, that looked like the snow when the sun shines upon it——"

Thus far I heard; then I fled up the wide shallow stairs, and dashed into my room in search of hat and tippet. "Was I dreaming, or did the mirror lie? Have I been wronging Eulalie in my thoughts? How could she look like that if——?"

Life had hitherto been such a smooth thing to me, sheltered from all harm in my Land of Beulah, that this, my first perplexity, was a very hard thing to bear. Like most evils that come upon us, it was easier thought out in the open air. I wandered about the garden, searched for the last violets under the brown leaves in the wood, patted Daisy, took a look at the poultry-yard, visited Amy Ladbroke's guinea-pig, and fed it with an apple. All these things I did and many more with restless energy, striving to stifle strange protesting thoughts that were unwonted visitants to my childish mind. But all in vain; they would make themselves heard.

Nestling here and there in shady nooks I found a few sweet-scented violets, and gathered them for Miss Mary's writing-table, arranging them with the best taste I could command, with little branching bits of moss here and there, and a tiny yellow-tipped fern frond by way of background. As I did this it seemed to me as though I were not the same Nell as the light-hearted girl who filled that same vase a week ago. Now, I had secrets from Miss Mary; things I could not tell her of. To speak ill of my school-friend would be, I felt, a sin unpardonable against all school traditions from the earliest ages.

And then there was papa; what was I to do about him?

The next time that I sat upon his knee, with my arm about his neck, if he should say to me: "Well, how many kisses, Nell, for keeping my promise about your school-

friend?" what should I do? Could I say: "She stole into a room like a thief; she read another person's letter on the sly; she can never be a lady any more?" No, I could not speak such words as those.

I had read in books, and in the best book of all, of fierce and sudden temptation assailing men and women, and bearing them onward like a resistless flood into dreadful depths of sin. And I reasoned myself into thinking that it had been like this with Eulalie. Her desolate, homeless position, her dependence on her own exertions, had made her the prey of intense fears as to what Miss Mary would say to Mrs. Langley. There had been some misunderstanding, some coldness, I knew, between Miss Mary and Eulalie; and this, no doubt, had made her doubly anxious in the matter. She had passed the window of the library and seen the former at the desk; passed again, and seen her place vacant; and so the temptation had come upon her, and she had yielded to it. Should I, her chosen friend, be the one to judge her hardly? I, to whom no greater temptation had ever yet come than a love of mischief might dictate? I, who had been so loved, so shielded, so tenderly nurtured; while she—my poor Eulalie—had known but a stormy childhood, in a home full of sorrow and wrong? As these softened thoughts came over me, I scarce could see the violets for tears. What should I ask papa to give me for Eulalie? She was going among strangers, people who lived well and dressed well, and her slender purse would not allow of any luxuries. She had her cross and chain like mine for evening wear, but—yes, let me see now: those white and taper fingers were without ornament, except one poor ring—a poor twist of gold—nothing like any of those rings that had belonged to my mother, and which papa had locked up in what had been her jewel-case at home. There was one—a serpent with a diamond eye—I would ask papa to let me give that to Eulalie, as a kind of parting gift.

Had a few more years passed over my head, I should have had better sense in my choice of an offering for Mrs. Langley's future governess; but nothing could in my eyes be too good or too beautiful for Eulalie, more especially in my present repentant state of mind, when I had reasoned myself into the conviction that I was somehow the sinner—she the sinned against.

After tea that night Miss Le Breton was sent for to the drawing-room, and after an

absence of half an hour came back very pale, but with a glad light in her eyes that had in it something of defiance, and rather puzzled me.

"Is it all right?" I whispered, as I passed her with a pile of lesson-books in my arms.

"Yes, Nell, thanks to you, dear," she answered; and I went to my place and entered into an encounter with my task, with a jubilant energy that made short work with all difficulties. Naturally the pupil-teachers at Summerfield were under fewer restrictions than we scholars, so I was not much surprised late that evening to see Eulalie come in from the garden by the glass-door of the teachers' room. She had a shawl folded over her head, and looked wonderfully lovely. Prayers and supper were over, and I was just going up to bed, when Mam'zelle had asked me to fetch her netting from the teachers' room, and that was how I chanced to encounter Eulalie.

"Out so late!" I said, setting down the candle I held upon the table, and forgetting all about Mam'zelle's behest.

"Yes," she said; "the night is so lovely, and I have a weary headache; I thought the cool air might do it good."

She sat down by the table, resting her head upon her hand—and oh, what a white, wan, hopeless face the light of my candle showed me!

I knelt beside her and took her hand, whose deathly chill struck to mine.

"You have been worrying yourself too much about Mrs. Langley," I said, frightened by her looks; "it is all over now, dear, and you must not worry any more."

"Yes," she said, echoing my words, "it is all over now; and I should be glad, should I not? glad—and—content——"

But her lip quivered as she spoke; and her eyes, dim and heavy, seemed to be looking at all things through a mist.

"Are you ill, dear Eulalie? shall I call Miss Mary?" I said, alarmed. "Do let me fetch her."

"No, no, fetch no one," she answered hastily. "I'm not ill, Nell—only tired—tired out, dear."

"Tired with telling fairy tales?" I began; then I broke off suddenly into a new subject. All this time I had held her hand in both my own, gently chafing it to try and warm the poor chilled fingers. Now I noticed that the little hoop of gold was gone, only a tiny red mark round the finger where it had been remaining.

"Oh, Eulalie!—your ring—see, it is not there!"



"No," she said, speaking in a tired, weary voice, the like of which I had never heard from her lips before; "it is—not there. I have lost it, Nell."

"Lost it? Well, that's a pity; but it was not of much value, was it, dear?"

"No—it wasn't of much value," she answered once more, like an echo. "But it's a pity, as you say."

"Did you lose it while you were out just now?"

"Yes—I dropped it—I was standing by the pool in the fields—at the deepest side—under the alders."

"Then you will never see it again."

"No—I shall never see it again." This time she gave a shudder as she played the part of echo.

"Never mind—don't mind—don't think about it," I said eagerly. "I'll ask papa to give me a better one for you—a golden serpent with a diamond eye."

Something in my words wrought a strange change in her mood. She laughed a hard laugh that had a mocking sound, and pushed me from her.

"That would be a good exchange for my poor little gold hoop," she said, with something that seemed like a strangled sob, "wouldn't it, Nell?"

At that moment the sound of tapping heels, and a shrill voice came along the passage:

"Que faites-vous donc, Mademoiselle Nellée? Dépêchez-vous—dépêchez-vous, mon enfant."

"Run away; don't let her come here," whispered Eulalie; and I, picking up Mam'zelle's netting, hurried to meet that irate personage, carrying my candle with me, and leaving the teachers' room lighted only by the shadowy haze of the star-shine outside.

I went up to bed, and there lay still, but widely wakeful. I slept in a small room leading off the large dormitory, and could hear the subdued chatter and flutter of the girls; a sound that died away at last, as if a flock of birds had gone to roost, and settled down, after many chirpings and rustlings, on their several perches.

The old house was so still that I could hear, muffled by distance, the clock of Bromley church tolling out the hour of ten.

At eleven Miss Mary would come upstairs, look in upon me, from the sheer force of the habit of old times, and so pass to her room on the other side of the passage. How I could look back to the days of my baby-hood, for I was little more than a

baby when I first came to Summerfield, and remember the soft touch of her long ringlets on my cheek as she bent over my pillow to "kiss me good-night!"

That time seemed very far away now, for the weight of my first perplexity was heavy upon me; thoughts, and fears, and strange surmises, that could not be spoken of to her, that could not be told to papa, seemed to bow my young head as with the burden of years.

Night and solitude are strange magnifiers, and I soon felt that I was thinking myself into a fever. "I will go to sleep, and forget it all till to-morrow," I resolved. But, as we all know, to resolve to sleep is inevitably to lie awake, and find oneself in the clutch of the demon, restlessness; so, after tossing about for half an hour longer I slipped out of bed, and took up a wholly unlawful position, namely, a corner of the low seat in the window of my room. All the windows at Summerfield had those dear devices, cushioned with crimson chintz, and very havens of rest and delight in summer-time; but I had no manner of business sitting there at that hour of the night. Perhaps for that very reason did I enjoy it the more. To pull up the blind was the next step I took, and I had my reward in the sight of the loveliest of night landscapes. My room looked out at the back of the house on to the wide garden, and the coppice lay between that and the wood. Under the alder-trees was a black shiny patch, just now bridged by a line of light, for the fair young moon was making a mirror of our pool, and turning to silver the rushes that fringed its margin. The whole world looked ghostly in the shimmer, and full of mysterious shadows; wherein might lurk, I fancied, elves of various kinds. I was just calling to mind my stock of fairy lore, when lo! a veritable ghost—a restless, wandering shade—came out from the shadow of the alders; a tall slight figure, with its bowed head shrouded in white folds.

Slowly up and down by the margin of the pool this figure paced; then, to my affright and sore amaze, it raised its clasped hands aloft, and wrung them as in the throes of some ineffable despair.

The next day I was almost fain to persuade myself that I had fallen asleep in the wide old window seat of my room, and dreamt of that weird figure on the margin of the pool; the figure that wrung its hands, and that I knew to be Eulalie.

No summer day could be calmer or

more perfectly placid than was my friend, now setting herself seriously to work upon preparations for prompt flight to Hazledene Rectory.

After true school-girl fashion her companions and pupils presented her with many parting presents; and if being amply provided with pin-cushions, pen-wipers, book-markers, and such-like gear, could ensure a happy future for Miss Le Breton, she would assuredly have never known "a carking care." I gave her no parting gift. I was waiting until I should see my father, and find a fitting opportunity to broach the subject of the serpent with the diamond eye.

Gradually the events of that strange evening, when I had seen Eulalie come in from the garden to the teacher's room, seemed to grow less vivid to me. I was, after all, but a child still, and impressions glided off me like the figures that came and went in the surface of the old round mirror that had reflected Eulalie's wrongdoing. I was very miserable when the actual parting with my school-friend came, very damply sad and limply sentimental; and, as we all stopped our work to kiss and say "Good-bye" to the pupil-teacher, my young heart seemed well-nigh ready to burst with grief.

Eulalie, perfectly beautiful in her plain new travelling-dress and little snood-like bonnet, took a quiet farewell of each, and kissed little solemn-faced Amy twice over. Then came my turn; but, with a pleading look at Miss Mary standing by, I slipped my hand through her arm, and so went out on to the hall-steps. Here stood Miss Maria, with the key-basket, shaped like a boat, on her arm; and "ce gentil Monsieur José," with his little fiddle in his hand, was assisting at "speeding the parting" traveller.

I caught, through my tears, a glimpse of the sweet face smiling at our assembled group from the fly-window; saw Miss Maria wave her key-basket, Miss Mary kiss her hand, and Monsieur José perform a series of bows of ideal grace, and then—

My school-friend was gone, the bell rang for the dancing-class to assemble, and squeak, scrape, squeak, went the little fiddle as its owner glided down the passage towards the lower school-room. I was very lonely, and used to sing the song that

always seemed to be associated with my thoughts of her:

Te souviens-tu Marie.  
De notre enfance aux champs;

throwing all my heart and soul into the last refrain:

Le temps que je regrette.  
C'est le temps qui n'est plus!

One night, when the Christmas holidays were drawing near and Eulalie's departure had become but a misty recollection to the rest of my companions, I was sitting by the school-room fire reading, when Miss Mary came into the school-room, looked round to every group, and then crossed over to my side.

As she laid her hand upon my shoulder I felt it tremble, and looking up met her soft eyes, filled with what seemed half pity and half love, that held a mother's tender yearning. "Nell," she said—and what a strange tremble was in her voice as she spoke—"the snow being so deep has delayed the post-boy until now; there is a letter for you, love, on the library table."

"Is it from papa, Miss Mary?" I said, starting up, and laying my book upon the mantelshelf.

"Yes, Nell."

She said no more, and turned away and left me. Left me to make the inevitable reverence at the school-room door with impatience at my heart, and then to hurry to the library with more speed than grace. I was hungry for a letter from papa; for those dear epistles had been few and far between of late.

It struck me afterwards, though not at the time, that it was by design I was sent to read my letter alone in that quiet room. I read it—all its loving expressions of tenderness—all its bright, happy anticipations of sunny days to come for him, and for "his little girl"; but of all the words I read, the only sentence that seemed real to me was this:

"And the name of my wife that is to be, dear Nell, is—Eulalie."

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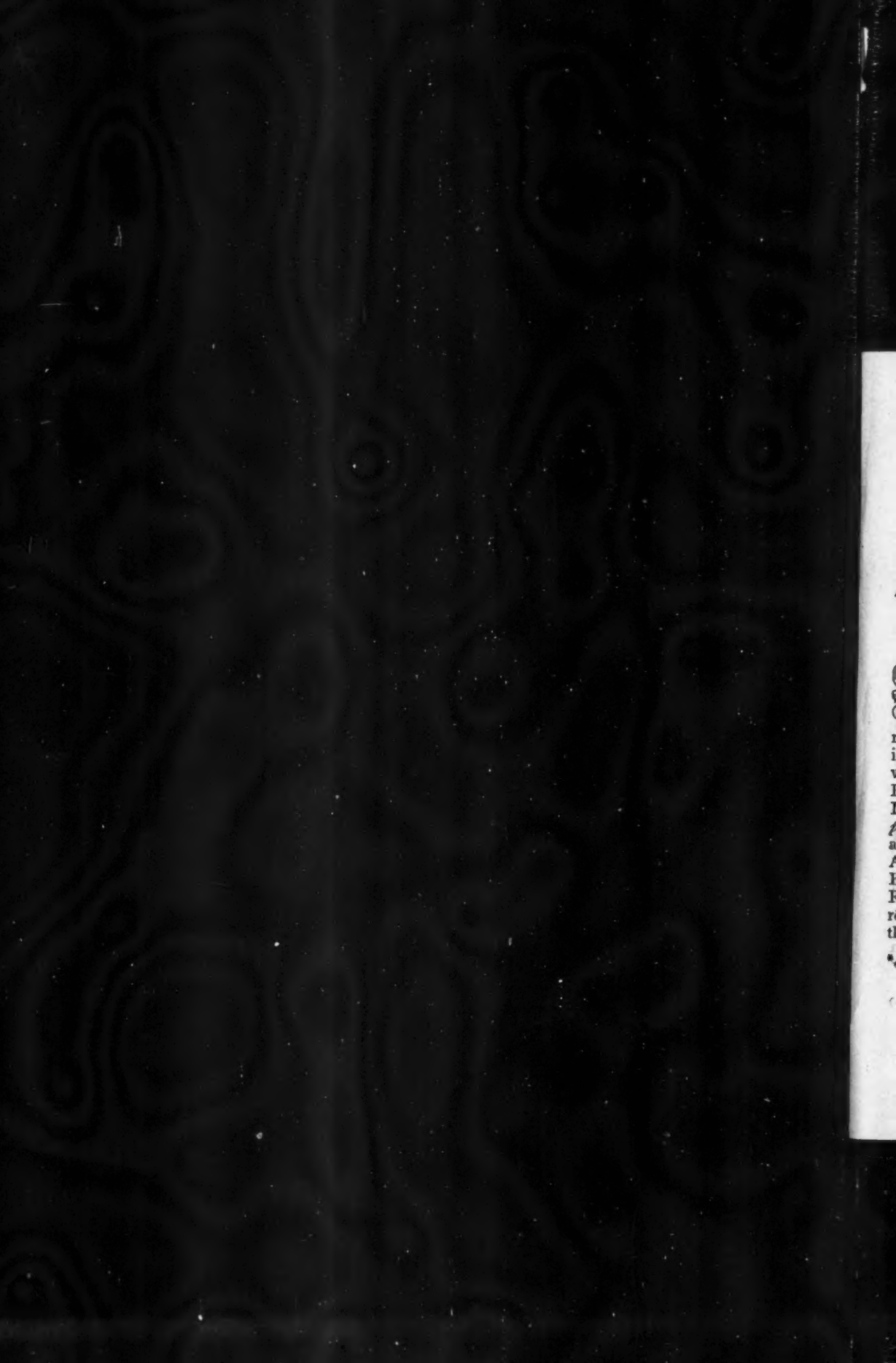
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